



STATE OF CONNECTICUT

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS' AFFAIRS

287 West Street
Rocky Hill, Connecticut 06067

TESTIMONY OF

COMMISSIONER LINDA S. SCHWARTZ, RN, MSN, DrPH, FAAN

Connecticut Department of Veterans' Affairs

Presented to the Committee on Veterans' Affairs

February 25, 2014

Good Afternoon Senator Leone, Representative Hennessy and members of the Committee. The Connecticut Department of Veteran Affairs appreciates this opportunity to comment on several legislative proposals being considered by the Committee.

RSB 210 VETERANS WHO SERVED IN THE NATIONAL GUARD proposes that the Department conduct a study of services that are not available to veterans who served in the National Guard. Specifically, that the study would include the need for additional services, obstacles to providing them and possible ways to facilitate their provision and implementation. As used in the Connecticut General Statutes, Section 27-103 members of the Connecticut National Guard and reserve components of any of the US Armed Forces that perform duties under Title 38 of the United States Code and receive an "Honorable" discharge or are released under "Honorable Conditions" are included in the definition of those eligible for various veterans' benefits. These benefits are principally decided by Congress as set forth in Title 38 of the United States Code and do not include all those who served in the National Guard or Reserve Components of the Military Services. In 2007, we sought and obtained authorization from the General Assembly to permit the burial of members of the National Guard or Reservists, eligible for Retirement, in our State Cemeteries. This was at no additional cost to the State because the time in service of these particular "Retirees" were equal to the burial benefits of a military veteran. Connecticut is one of a few States to permit non-veterans to be buried in a State Veteran's Cemetery.

As you may know I served both on Active Duty and as a Reservist in the US Air Force and am very well aware of the commitment made by our citizen soldiers who do not serve in the active forces. However this is not a State issue. Many members of the Guard and Reserves are veterans by virtue of their service on Active Duty; however the disparity in access to benefits in many instances is set by Federal Law. We are aware that Congressman Courtney and Senator Blumenthal are working on Federal legislation to address this very issue. The Department of Veteran Affairs looks forward to working with the Committee to synthesize the essence of this issue and develop a plan of action.

RSB 212 and RSB 5299 THE MILITARY OCCUPATIONAL SPECIALTY TASK FORCE. The Connecticut Department of Veteran Affairs whole heartedly supports the work and recommendations of the Military Occupational Specialty Task Force and the recognition of the training and experiences acquired during military service. The work of this Task Force has great promise and opportunity for employment for veterans and enhanced services for all Connecticut citizens. While both of these proposals are similar in the strategy of implementation, I would respectfully suggest that the provisions in RSB 5299 which give the Commissioner of Veteran Affairs the responsibility "To take any steps necessary to ensure that state agencies recognize and accept military training and experience when a veteran applies for an occupational license, and that the spouses of veterans are provided with automatic temporary occupational licenses, including temporary certifications for teachers" are an entirely new mission for the Department which neither has the staffing, finances, resources or expertise to accomplish this very important task. We believe the Department of Labor, OFFICE FOR VETERANS WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT has been successfully performing tasks very similar to the ones described in the legislation. The best use of existing resources with additional financial resources would be to continue to use the talent and assets of the Veterans Workforce Development to continue the oversight of this program.

RSB 213 VETERANS OPPORTUNITIES PILOT PROGRAM. The Connecticut Department of Veteran Affairs supports the spirit and intent of this legislation to create a statewide "Veterans Opportunities Pilot Program" to create new opportunities and additional resources for employment of homeless veterans. As you may know, Connecticut State Veterans Home at Rocky Hill is the second largest residential program for homeless veterans in America. Our capacity of 400 veterans is second only to California with occupancy of 1,000. Since I have been Commissioner, we have served over 500 veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan. We have had a Vocational Specialist on Staff assigned to our Residential Program since 1992 and have support programs for substance abuse, medical care, social work and individualized action programs for all veterans on the campus of the Rocky Hill Home. We have been successful in returning approximately 30% of our veterans each year back into the community with housing and educational and/or viable employment placements. A very important aspect of our programs is the collaboration we have with the Connecticut Department of Labor "Veterans Workforce Development Program". In these days of the "draw down" with increased numbers of military members being forced out of service, there is a great need in all parts of the veteran community for help and assistance in finding work that yields a "living wage". Governor Malloy has outlined a vigorous strategy to address the needs of veterans and most recently homeless veterans.

However as I read the criteria and expectations for this "pilot program", I would be remiss if I did not question the need to create an entire new network with a separate system when we already have trained cadres of veterans knowledgeable and proficient with all that goes into "understanding the employment challenges and advantages unique to veterans" and a capacity "to manage a network of employment services for veterans" with experience in "identifying and coordinating employment specialists and job developers throughout the state who work with veterans." The Veterans Workforce Development Program at DOL already delivers many of the components described in this legislation such as "centralizing and facilitating job referrals, an organized network of employers." Connecticut is

also fortunate to have CTWORKS, a partnership of organizations providing effective workforce assistance to job seekers and businesses and The WorkPlace in Bridgeport which is a much acclaimed collaborative effort among, state, regional and local organizations. All of these agencies have a proven track record and a staff dedicated to employment and veterans. Additionally, the recently organized Connecticut Veterans Chamber of Commerce will be a very important partner in this process. Given the great need and urgency of the Governor's plan, the veterans of Connecticut would be best served if this legislation left the administration of the program to the experts and augmented their staff with additional positions, resources and funding needed to adequately incorporate the needs of homeless veterans and veterans at risk of homelessness. We do not have to create a duplication of services. The best utilization of the resources, staffing and funding available and the greatest success and accountability of this very worthy goal is best served by placing the program at the discretion of the Commissioner of Labor in consultation with the Commissioner of Veteran Affairs

RSB 216 AN ACT CONCERNING VETERANS The proposal for the Department of Veteran Affairs to conduct a study to determine what hardships are prevalent among the state's veterans is broad with a very short timeline. In previous Sessions, this Committee has passed legislation which is very thoughtful and reflects the concern members have for meeting the needs of the 277,000 veterans and 6-8,000 Connecticut military members serving on Active Duty. Unfortunately, The Connecticut Department of Veteran Affairs has never received adequate funding to conduct these studies, registries or health initiatives. The Department in conjunction with Central Connecticut State University O'Neil Center for Public Policy did conduct a "Needs Assessments" for veterans in 2005 and 2008 much of that work was volunteer and academic pursuits which made these Assessments feasible. The financial impact for the cost of an undertaking the study described in RSB 216 would be projected to be in excess of \$75,000 because this would require more staff and resources than are currently available to the Department.

RSB 218 CREATING A VETERANS PROJECTS ACCOUNT The proposal to add a "Veterans Projects" account option for taxpayers to designate veterans as a recipient of refunds from the State of Connecticut is both worthy and laden with concerns. From the Commissioners view, there are many worthy projects and community programs that address the ever changing and challenging needs of veterans and their families in the 21st Century however funding is often the biggest obstacles for these efforts. We have received many well intentioned requests for funding, everything from purchasing flags to mark the graves of veterans in Cemeteries across the State, therapeutic riding programs, home repairs, transportation programs so veterans can make VA and other Medical Appointments, funds for rental deposits, security payments and emergency housing. Several years ago out of a real need to address these and other needs of the veteran community, we made the decision to activate the "Temporary Assistance Fund" in January of 2009 through the generosity of private donors (\$40,000), we have been able make contributions to homeless shelters, provide rental assistance for veteran families, buy furniture for new families using HUD VASH vouchers, clothing for children, paying for fuel oil, utilities and medical bills totaling over \$31,000 since we began the Fund. If it were not for the support of our donors, veteran service and civic organizations, we would not have been able to assist the 65 veterans who came to us for help. Many Connecticut citizens want to help veterans and their families but do not know how or do not have the time to make a donation. The proposed legislation provides a

perfect way to facilitate their contributions. Thus we do believe that the spirit and intent of this legislation is much needed and would do much good. At the same time, I would be remiss if I did not say that we must not replicate the mistakes of the past. As we ponder the good, we must factor in accountability for the funding, the criteria for awarding grants and outcome measures which reflect the real effectiveness of this program. Hopefully we have learned from some of the problems of the past. We must also be mindful that many organizations today purport to care for veterans but in actuality do not use the funding for veterans. Care must be made in developing the process for these funds to assure that the funding goes to the veterans in need.

RHB 5294 TECHNICAL CHANGES TO THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS' AFFAIRS STATUTES. We support the changes proposed in this legislation. For obvious reasons, this change should also be made throughout the Statutes governing the Department of Veteran Affairs.

This concludes my testimony, I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.